Antillia: A Portuguese/Iberian Legend

David Lee Fernandes, 806studio@proton.me
December 2024

Introduction

In the annals of exploration and cartography, certain enigmatic places stand out as symbols of mystery, adventure, and discovery. Among these, Antillia holds a prominent place, captivating the human imagination with its elusive presence and mythical allure. Known by various spellings and depicted in numerous maps, Antillia has transcended its status as a mere geographical curiosity to become a symbol of exploration, imagination, and cultural fascination.

The story of Antillia begins in the mists of medieval cartography, where it appears as a vague reference on maps alongside tales of mythical lands and fantastical creatures. From its earliest mentions on Pizzigano's map of 1367 to its unmistakable emergence on Beccario's map of 1435, Antillia's journey through history is marked by legends, myths, and cartographic representations that have shaped our understanding of the world and fueled our sense of wonder and curiosity.

In this comprehensive exploration, we embark on a journey to unravel the mysteries of Antillia and shed light on its enduring allure. From the letters of Toscanelli to the anonymous maps housed in prestigious collections, each piece of evidence offers a glimpse into the complexity of myth and reality that shrouds this legendary island. By delving into the origins of Antillia's representation on maps, tracing its mythical origins, and

exploring the cultural significance attributed to it, we aim to uncover the truth behind the legend and gain new insights into the enduring legacy of exploration and discovery.

Through the chapters that follow, we will explore the origins of Antillia's representation on medieval maps, tracing its evolution from enigmatic references to prominent features on Renaissance cartography. We will delve into the legends and myths surrounding Antillia, examining its association with the Seven Cities, Portuguese settlers, and mythical riches. We will also analyze the cartographic representations of Antillia, exploring the evolving perceptions of geography, exploration, and myth during the Age of Discovery and beyond. Finally, we will reflect on the legacy of Antillia, examining its enduring impact on exploration, literature, and popular culture, and pondering the lessons it offers for future generations of explorers and adventurers.

As we embark on this journey of exploration and discovery, let us remember the words of Jules Verne: "The sea is everything. It covers seven-tenths of the terrestrial globe. Its breath is pure and healthy. It is an immense desert, where man is never lonely, for he feels life stirring on all sides." In the vast expanse of the unknown, let us embrace the spirit of adventure and curiosity that defines the human experience, and let us continue to chart new courses and venture into the realms of myth and legend, inspired by the timeless allure of Antillia.

Battista Beccario 1435 map

Portolan Chart by Albino de Canepa 1489

Table of Contents

Chapter 1 The Origins of Antillia

Chapter 2 Legends and Myths of Antillia

Chapter 3 Cartographic Representations of Antillia

Chapter 4 The Legacy of Antillia

Chapter 5 The Great Lisbon Earthquake

Final Thoughts

Chapter 1 The Origins of Antillia

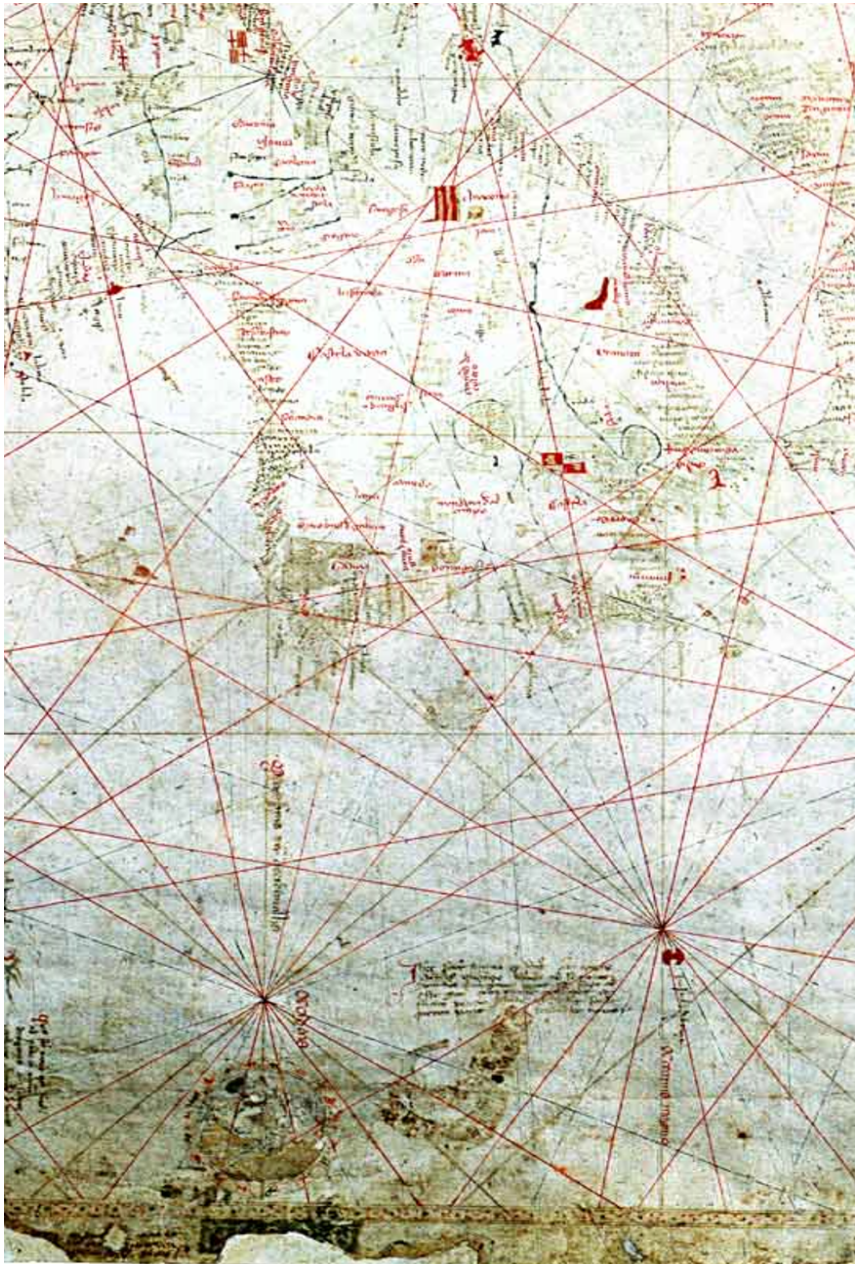
The origins of Antillia can be traced back to medieval maps, where it appears under various spellings and enigmatic descriptions. One of the earliest references to a place resembling Antillia can be found on Pizzigano's map of 1367, where it is mentioned as "Atilae" or "Atulae," suggesting a location with a monumental statue on the shore. However, the exact identity and significance of this reference remain uncertain, hinting at the elusive nature of the island's origins.

It is on Pizzigano’s map of 1367 that Antillia unmistakably emerges for the first time. Yet Antillia's depiction on Beccario's map, denoted as the primary island among a cluster of four sizable islands. Described as an elongated quadrilateral with seven two-lobed bays along its perimeter and a larger bay at its southern tip, laid the foundation for its subsequent representations on maps for centuries to come.

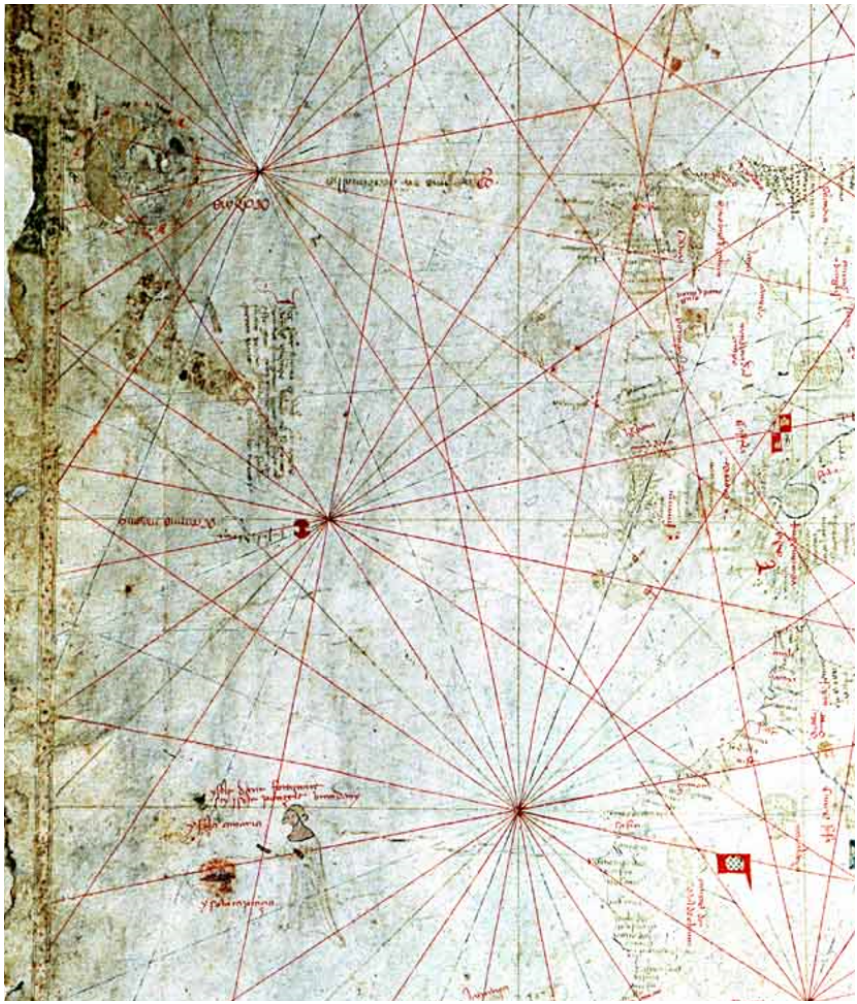
The etymology of the name "Antillia" remains shrouded in mystery, with scholars speculating on its possible linguistic origins. Some suggest a connection to the Arabic word "al-tin" meaning "clay" or "earth," while others propose a derivation from the Latin word "antilia," meaning "opposite." However, these theories are speculative and lack concrete evidence, adding to the intrigue surrounding the island's name.

Moreover, the correlation between the name "Antillia" and the number of its purported cities is notable yet enigmatic. While

legends often speak of seven cities on the island, similar nomenclature is also found on the next largest island in the group, Saluaga, diminishing the uniqueness of the association. Nonetheless, the recurring motif of seven cities adds to the



Pizziagno 1367 fragment showing Portgual/Spain (Top) and the Atlantic Ocean (Bottom)

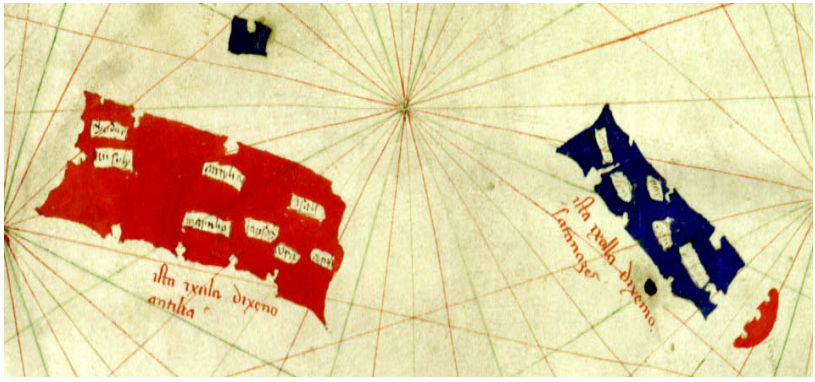


Pizziagno 1367 fragment showing Portgual/Spain/Northern Africa (Left) and the Atlantic Ocean (Right)

mythological allure of Antillia, reinforcing its status as a legendary destination.

The depiction of Antillia on medieval maps raises questions about its geographical inspiration and cultural significance. Was Antillia based on actual geographical knowledge, or was it purely a product of cartographic imagination? Did legends of mythical islands influence the portrayal of Antillia on maps, or were there real-world landmarks that inspired its depiction?

By delving into the origins of Antillia's representation on medieval maps, we aim to uncover the historical context and cultural influences that shaped the perception of this legendary island. Through an analysis of primary sources and scholarly interpretations, we seek to unravel the mysteries surrounding Antillia's emergence in cartography and its enduring significance in the annals of exploration and discovery.



Pizzigano 1424 map fragment showing Antillia (Left), Santarem (Right. Not to be mistaken with Santarem on mainland Portugal)

Chapter 2 Legends and Myths of Antillia

The legend of Antillia is a rich with tales of adventure, exploration, and mythical riches. From its association with the Seven Cities to its purported role as a refuge for Portuguese settlers fleeing Moorish conquest, Antillia's myths have captured the imagination of explorers, scholars, and storytellers alike.

One of the earliest mentions of Antillia in historical records can be traced back to the correspondence between Toscanelli, a cosmographer from Florence, and Christopher Columbus in 1474. In a letter to a confidant in the service of the King of Portugal, Toscanelli mentioned Antillia as the starting point for a westward voyage to reach the esteemed island of Cipango (Japan). This letter, along with others, provided Columbus with the inspiration and confidence to embark on his journey across the Atlantic in search of a new route to the East Indies.

The myth of Antillia as a refuge for Portuguese settlers fleeing the Moorish conquest of Spain further solidified its place in cartography and tradition. According to legends propagated by Fernando Colon and others, Antillia was believed to be a haven where seven bishops and their followers established cities in 714, burning their ships to prevent any thoughts of return to Spain. These tales, embellished over time, reinforced the image of Antillia as a mythical paradise teeming with riches and untouched by the outside world.

Subsequent cartographic representations of Antillia, including Ruysch's map of 1508, further perpetuated the myth by positioning the island in the Atlantic Ocean and associating it

with the Spanish monarch Roderik's refuge. Despite the lack of concrete evidence supporting the existence of such an island, the allure of Antillia persisted, fueled by tales of Portuguese encounters with the island and its purported riches.

The British Museum houses an anonymous world map tentatively dated to 1520, which depicts the Seven Cities (Septem Civitates) along a coastal stretch extending from a point significantly west of "terra de los bacalos" to a location nearly opposite the western extremity of Cuba. This representation, along with others, reinforces the association between Antillia and the mythical Seven Cities, perpetuating the legend for generations to come.

The enduring appeal of Antillia lies not only in its mythical origins but also in its cultural significance as a symbol of exploration and discovery. Whether a figment of imagination or a lost island waiting to be discovered, Antillia continues to captivate the human imagination, inviting us to embark on a journey of exploration and discovery into the realms of myth and legend.

By exploring the legends and myths surrounding Antillia, we gain insights into the human fascination with the unknown and the enduring power of storytelling to shape our understanding of the world around us. Through an analysis of historical records, cartographic representations, and cultural interpretations, we aim to unravel the mysteries of Antillia and uncover the truth behind the legend.

Chapter 3 Cartographic Representations of Antillia

The cartographic representations of Antillia offer a fascinating glimpse into the evolving perceptions of geography, exploration, and myth during the Age of Discovery and beyond. From its earliest depictions on medieval maps to its portrayal on Renaissance cartography, Antillia's presence on maps has shaped the imaginations of explorers, scholars, and cartographers for centuries.

The earliest known depiction of Antillia can be found on Beccario's map of 1435, where it is denoted as the primary island among a cluster of four sizable islands termed "Insulle a Novo Repte" or the "Newly Reported Islands." This portrayal laid the groundwork for subsequent representations, depicting Antillia as an elongated quadrilateral with seven two-lobed bays along its perimeter, alongside a larger bay at its southern tip. Such details provided cartographers with a template for depicting Antillia in their own maps, contributing to its enduring presence in cartographic history.

One notable example of Antillia's depiction can be found on the anonymous world map housed in the British Museum, tentatively dated to 1520. This map, akin to La Cosa's 1500 map, exhibits a distortion of the Atlantic coastline, projecting a nearly westward orientation. The Seven Cities (Septem Civitates) are depicted through conventional symbols resembling miters, scattered along a coastal stretch extending from a point significantly west of "terra de los bacalos" and the Bay of Fundy to a location nearly opposite the western extremity of Cuba. This representation not only reinforces the association between Antillia

and the mythical Seven Cities but also highlights the cartographer's interpretation of geography and exploration during the early 16th century.

Subsequent maps, such as Desceliers' notable map of 1546, further perpetuated the legend of Antillia by positioning the island off the American coast, approximately one-third of the distance to the Bermudas and midway between Cape Breton and the Bay of Fundy. In this depiction, Antillia is depicted as considerably sized, featuring deeply indented coastlines and irregular outlines akin to Celebes. Adjacent to some of its projecting peninsulas lie two smaller islets, adding to the mystique surrounding the island. An inscription on the map identifies it as Sete Cidades, affirming its affiliation with Portugal and reinforcing its status as a legendary destination.

Despite the varying depictions and interpretations of Antillia on maps, one consistent theme emerges: the enduring allure of the unknown and the human fascination with exploration. Whether a mythical paradise or a lost island waiting to be discovered, Antillia continues to captivate the human imagination, inviting us to embark on a journey of exploration and discovery into the realms of myth and legend.

By examining the cartographic representations of Antillia, we gain insights into the evolving perceptions of geography, exploration, and myth during the Age of Discovery and beyond. Through an analysis of historical maps, scholarly interpretations, and cultural significance, we aim to unravel the mysteries of Antillia and uncover the truth behind the legend.

Chapter 4 The Legacy of Antillia

The legacy of Antillia extends far beyond its mythical origins, leaving an indelible mark on exploration, literature, and popular culture. From its association with St. Michael's Island to the contrasting perspectives of scholars like Humboldt, Antillia's enduring allure continues to captivate the human imagination, inviting us to explore the intersection of myth and reality.

One aspect of Antillia's legacy lies in its association with St. Michael's Island, particularly the Valley of the Seven Cities. While Terceira retains its medieval appellation of Brazil to designate a particular headland, St. Michael's Island similarly maintains its association with the Seven Cities. This observation, casually noted in historical records and guidebooks, underscores the enduring significance of Antillia in the cultural landscape of the Azores.

Moreover, the apparent lack of curiosity surrounding the legend of Antillia has not been uniformly observed. Some scholars, such as Humboldt, offer contrasting perspectives that challenge the traditional narratives surrounding the Seven Cities. Humboldt's reminder of the Seven Cities of Cibola, though geographically distant from Antillia, prompts us to reconsider the origins and implications of the legend. While New Mexico would have been inaccessible to the Portuguese circa 711, St. Michael's Island presented an accessible and enticing refuge. This alternative interpretation highlights the complex interplay between myth and reality in shaping our understanding of Antillia's legacy.

The enduring allure of Antillia also finds expression in literature and popular culture. From tales of exploration and adventure to speculative fiction and fantasy, Antillia continues to inspire storytellers and creators across various mediums. Whether as a mythical paradise awaiting discovery or a symbol of the human quest for the unknown, Antillia's legacy transcends time and space, resonating with audiences around the world.

Furthermore, the enduring presence of Antillia's name and imagination in the cultural landscape underscores its significance as a symbol of exploration and discovery. Despite the lack of concrete evidence supporting its existence, Antillia remains a potent symbol of human curiosity and imagination, inviting us to embark on a journey of exploration and discovery into the realms of myth and legend.

In conclusion, the legacy of Antillia serves as a reminder of the enduring power of myth and the human quest for knowledge and adventure. Whether as a mythical paradise or a lost island waiting to be discovered, Antillia continues to capture the imagination of scholars, explorers, and storytellers alike, inviting us to explore the intersection of myth and reality in the ongoing quest for understanding and discovery.

Chapter 5 The Great Lisbon Earthquake of 1531

The 1531 Portuguese earthquake, also known as the Great Lisbon earthquake, was a seismic event of significant magnitude and impact. It occurred on January 26, 1531, affecting not only Portugal but also regions of Spain and Morocco. While historical records of the event are limited compared to more recent earthquakes, scholars have pieced together a comprehensive understanding of its effects through contemporary accounts and geological investigations.

The earthquake's epicenter was likely offshore, in the Atlantic Ocean near Lisbon, with estimated magnitudes ranging from 7.0 to 8.0 on the Richter scale. Its exact location and depth remain uncertain due to the lack of modern seismological instruments at the time. Nevertheless, the seismic waves propagated rapidly, leading to widespread devastation across the region.

The city of Lisbon bore the brunt of the earthquake's fury, experiencing severe shaking that caused extensive damage to buildings, infrastructure, and human life. Contemporary reports describe collapsing structures, including churches, palaces, and homes, burying residents under rubble. The loss of life was staggering, with estimates ranging from several thousand to tens of thousands of fatalities.

In addition to the immediate destruction caused by the seismic shaking, the earthquake triggered secondary hazards, exacerbating the disaster's impact. Tsunamis, generated by the undersea displacement of water, struck coastal areas with

immense force, flooding low-lying regions and causing further devastation. Fires, ignited by overturned candles and stoves during the quake, engulfed already weakened structures, compounding the destruction and hampering rescue efforts.

The socio-economic repercussions of the 1531 Portuguese earthquake were profound, reverberating throughout the affected regions for years to come. The loss of life and property inflicted significant hardship on communities, disrupting trade, commerce, and governance. Reconstruction efforts were slow and challenging, hindered by limited resources and the scale of devastation.

The earthquake also left an indelible mark on the cultural and psychological landscape of Portugal and beyond. The trauma and fear instilled by the disaster influenced artistic and literary works of the period, reflecting themes of mortality, suffering, and the unpredictability of nature. The event served as a reminder of the fragility of human civilization in the face of natural forces, prompting advancements in seismology, engineering, and urban planning in subsequent centuries.

The Azores region, located in the North Atlantic Ocean, experienced significant effects from the 1531 Portuguese earthquake, although the extent of the damage and the specific impacts varied depending on the proximity to the earthquake's epicenter and local geological conditions.

Given the Azores' relative proximity to mainland Portugal, it is likely that the islands experienced strong shaking during the earthquake, potentially leading to damage to buildings,

infrastructure, and natural landscapes. Given the Azores sits on the mid Atlantic Ridge, compared to mainland Portugal, the Azores may have been greatly affected by secondary hazards such as tsunamis and fires, as the islands' topography along the ridge would have influenced the magnitude and reach of these phenomena.

Historical records of the earthquake's effects on the Azores are limited, and specific details about the extent of damage and casualties may be scarce. However, it is reasonable to assume that the seismic event would have left a lasting impression on the communities living in the Azores, influencing local perceptions of natural hazards and shaping cultural and societal responses to future earthquakes and disasters.

In modern times, the Azores region remains seismically active, with ongoing monitoring and research efforts aimed at understanding the geological processes underlying seismicity in the area. These efforts are crucial for assessing and mitigating the risks posed by earthquakes and other natural hazards, ensuring the resilience and safety of the communities living in the Azores and other seismically active regions.

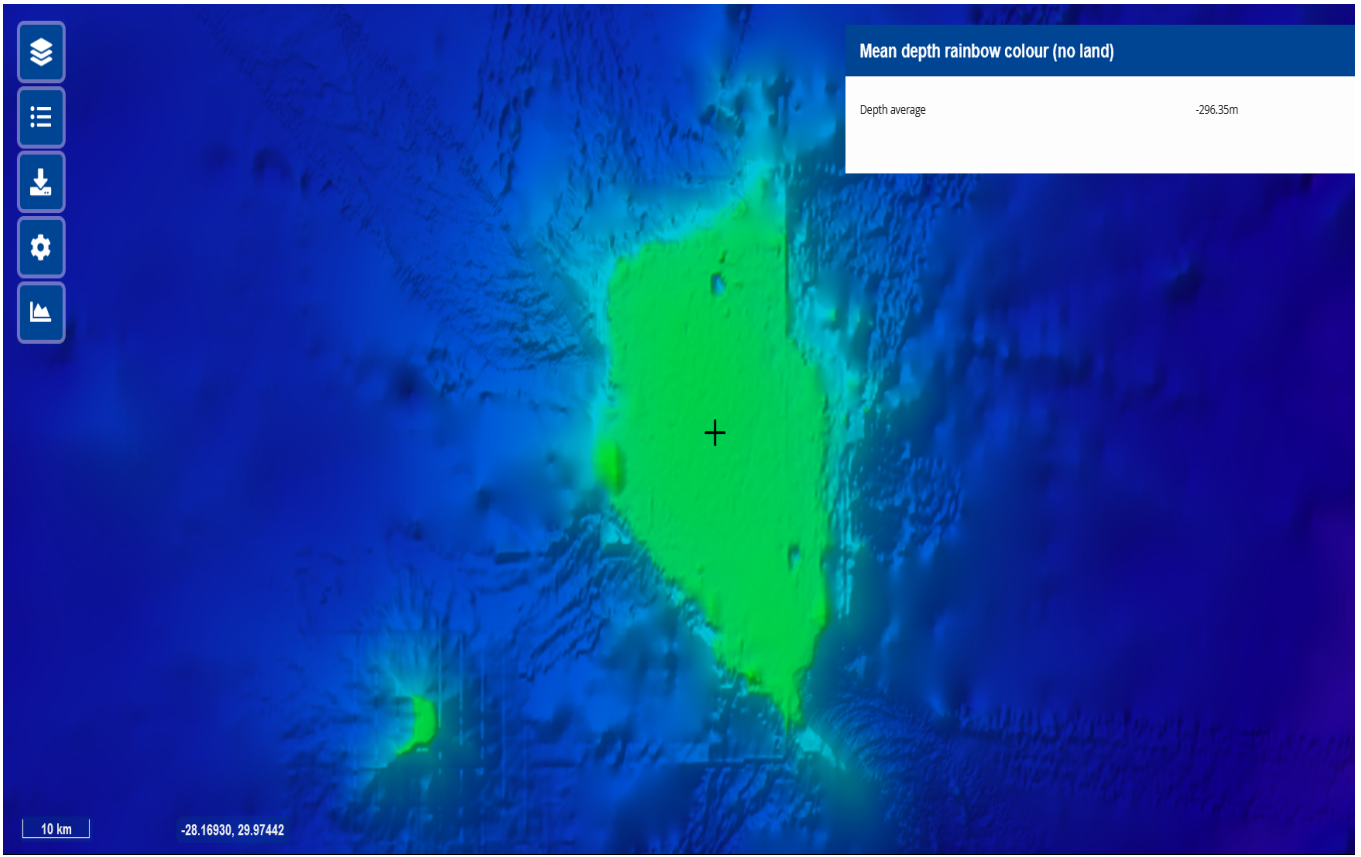
Final Thoughts

The story of Antillia is a testament to the enduring power of myth and the allure of the unknown. From its origins on medieval maps to its enduring presence in the annals of exploration, Antillia has left an indelible mark on the human imagination. As we have explored in this comprehensive examination, Antillia's journey through history is marked by legends, myths, and cartographic representations that have shaped our understanding of the world and fueled our sense of wonder and curiosity.

Through the chapters of this exploration, we have delved into the origins of Antillia's representation on maps, tracing its evolution from enigmatic references on medieval charts to prominent features on Renaissance cartography. We have explored the legends and myths surrounding Antillia, from its association with the Seven Cities to its purported role as a refuge for Portuguese settlers fleeing Moorish conquest. Each tale and representation offers a unique perspective on the enduring allure of this legendary island and its significance in the cultural landscape of exploration and discovery.

Possible Submerged Locations

These coordinates are within the Azores archipelago


Mean depth rainbow colour (no land)
Depth average
-296.35m
10 km
-28.16930, 29.97442